

## THE SFCC PROFILE: SOCIO-THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### The Bonsai Tree

*The bonsai tree in the attractive pot could have grown eighty feet tall on the side of a mountain til split by lightning. But a gardener carefully pruned it. It is nine inches high. Every day as he whittles back the branches the gardener croons, "It is your nature to be small and cozy, domestic and weak; how lucky, little tree to have a pot to grow in." With living creatures one must begin very early to dwarf their growth: the bound feet, the crippled brain, the hair in curlers, the hands you love to touch.*

Marge Piercy

If women through countless ages have been the bonsai trees in the male-kept gardens of the world, this has been true even more so of women religious. Through generations, women religious were confined and contained, carefully shaped and pruned back to fit the little pots assigned to them by male gardeners wearing purple, the mantles of supreme authority in the church and the self-appointed keepers of the ecclesial nursery. It was their task, the prelates determined, to prevent the spontaneous growth and unruly self-realization of these bonsai-women, lest they disturb the good order and discipline of the Vatican gardens they had so arduously designed.

There came a time, however—specifically in 1970—when a small group of “Bonsai-ed” women religious began to realize that little pots do not make for healthy roots, that tees so contained can never become all that God and nature intended them to be, that neither the creator God nor nature are well-served by tiny pots and pruning shears.

These women were our foremothers, the creative and courageous founders of the community whose 25th anniversary we have come to celebrate this summer amid the verdure and natural beauty of Pennsylvania. Pots were shattered in 1970 and new growth emerged, unfettered now, not a bit like bonsai, more like lilies of the field. The Sisters For Christian Community was born.

A story is told, apocryphal perhaps, of a canonical community’s Chapter of Elections some years ago. The woman who was ultimately elected superior general was apparently not a universal favorite. Shortly after the election, the chapter members received a telegram with the terse message: “Sorry I couldn’t be there. Signed: The Holy Spirit.” There is every evidence that the Holy Spirit was present among our founding sisters, for they have given us a profile, a vision, that is singular in

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its simplicity and astounding in its depth. It is a document which weds fidelity to our essential Christian tradition with liberation from artificial and other-imposed constraints. It is a document which calls us to the freedom of the daughters of God, to self-definition, to self-determination, and to self-giving in the recognition of our full humanity. It is this brief document, our SFCC Profile, on which I would like to offer some reflections--and perhaps some further challenges--and to which I will invite you to respond.

The sociology of religion tells us that to be both viable and authentic at any given time, a religion---and a religious community--must be, at one and the same time, both conservative and contemporary. It must be both faithful to its origins and responsive to the times and the cultures in which it finds itself. I will also propose that it must be prophetic, a courageous "voice of contradiction" where challenge is due. Without any rank ordering of the three, I would like to treat each of these--the conservative, the contemporary and the prophetic--in sequence.

### SFCC AS CONSERVATIVE

How many of you shuddered when I used the word "conservative"? While the word may conjure up images of Newt Gingrich, the religious right in our country today, or certain supreme pontiffs who shall remain nameless, conservatism--the conserving of the essential faith tradition--is one of the primary roles of religion. What we must continually distinguish, of course, is essential tradition from accidental tradition (sounds a bit like Aquinas: essence and accident, but it still works). We must keep the bulkhead of our ship of faith free from the barnacles of later invention that can attach themselves as we travel. Rosemary Radford Ruether speaks of this essential or original tradition as "the radical impulse of biblical faith," which, incidentally, she adds, is "fundamentally incompatible with patriarchy." It is this essential tradition, this "radical impulse of biblical faith," which SFCC so marvelously reflects.

We are, according to our profile, "Christian women." Even before our profile, the gospel is our primary document. We are an "ecclesial community," committed to "promoting the growth of Christian community (as) the people of God/the church radiant." We are women of Vatican II, concurring with that Council that "the period of concentration of works is ending"; that our lives and our loving service to God's people must know no bounds. And we are women who still witness to the value and validity of a commitment to Christ through poverty, chastity and obedience as a time-honored and gospel-based means of loving service to and sharing with others. Thus, the radical impulse of biblical faith, the conserving function of religion, is alive and well in our SFCC profile. More later on the prophetic function of these same vows.

### SFCC AS CONTEMPORARY

But a religion--and a religious community--even as it honors the radical impulse of biblical faith, must also be contemporary. It must be current, intelligible and in tune with the times of the world of today. In what way or ways is our SFCC profile contemporary? Most notably, I believe, our SFCC Profile is liberating for women. It was written almost simultaneously with the emergence of

the women's liberation movement in the larger society, offering finally to women religious the freedom to self-define and to self-determine in ways that were never possible before for any women.

Sisters For Christian Community are invited--and expected--to know and appreciate ourselves as individuals, with unique gifts to give and our own abilities to discern with the Holy Spirit the direction of those gifts in service to others. As a result, we have spanned the globe, taking our spirit of Christian community to the barrio and to the university, to the parish and to the nursing home, to the classroom and to the board room. We are sheltering the homeless and counseling the hopeless, while others, in retirement or ill health, provide the invaluable resource of prayer to sustain the laborers in these many vineyards. As our Profile so beautifully states: "Wherever there is need for Christian love and community witness, we seek to be present, permeating the world." No "special permission" of a superior needed!

Again, as a contemporary community, SFCC's experience an exhilarating--if sometimes frightening--new adulthood in assuming responsibility for our own material needs, an aspect of SFCC which enables us to understand as never before, by actually sharing in, the challenges of ordinary people who must plan and pay for their livelihood, their education, their health care, their retirement, their death and burial. Even their taxes! The insecurity is not easy for many of us, especially those who came from "total care" congregations, but it makes us "real" in a world where reality is harsh, indeed, for so many of our sisters and brothers.

### SFCC AS PROPHETIC

As I have suggested, religion--and a religious community---to be both viable and authentic, must combine in its lived theology both that which is conservative of the essential tradition--in our case, the "radical impulse of biblical faith"--and that which enables it to make sense to the contemporary world. To be contemporary, we must, to use a popular phrase, be able and willing to "read the signs of the times". And we must be responsive to some of those signs. Note, however, that here I emphasize some. For, as Shakespeare would put it, "The times are out of joint; O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right." For all its advancement in science and technology, in literature, learning and the arts, our times are out of joint in many ways, and it is here that religion--and religious communities--must not only be discriminating, but must often exercise that third function of religion, its prophetic function. We must read the "signs of the times" with what Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza calls "a hermeneutic of suspicion." We must learn to read our contemporary world in the light of the spirit of the gospel and make our assessments accordingly. As the prophets of old, we must courageously speak out--and live out--our critique of all that is antithetical to the radical impulse of biblical faith. Fidelity to this biblical faith must be our "litmus test" for assessing the "signs of the times."

To what extent is SFCC a prophetic voice in the contemporary world? It is here that I wish to return to the commitment that we make as community members, to the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, "freshly expressed in terms of serving, loving, and listening."

Our poverty "is concerned with the quality of Christ-like living and servicing that it facilitates." We are well rid, I think, of the word "poverty" as a value in itself, for destitution of any kind is ultimately dehumanizing and surely not to be sought. What we are called to by this commitment is, rather, a lifestyle, a way of living that is both simple and generous. We are called to live frugally in a consumer society, to distinguish between our "needs" and our "wants", so that we may have more to share with those in actual poverty. In effect, we are called not to live poorly but to live for the poor. This is not, sad to say, the philosophy of our world today. But it is clearly the message of the gospel we embrace. Granted, for many of us, living simply is as much necessity as choice. Yet, even this necessity becomes prophecy when we share from the little that we have and when we advocate with what we do have--our example, our energy, our voice, and our vote--for the dispossessed of the earth--the homeless, the immigrant, the marginated, the lonely, the abandoned, the imprisoned. Thus our poverty becomes prophecy in a world whose "disposable items" too often included our very sisters and brothers in Christ.

"We give witness to Christian community through celebrate love," our profile states. What a revolutionary, prophetic declaration in a contemporary culture which too often equates sexuality with sexual activity and then proceeds to divorce sexual activity from any meaningful and enduring form of interpersonal, human commitment. How startling for this culture to find women who, while acknowledging and glorying in their full sexuality as women, choose to live this sexuality counter-culturally. Women who demonstrate in their daily lives that through continence, continence as consecrated chastity, their womanly love is not less human but only more far-reaching. With Christ as her model, her only "significant other," the Sister For Christian Community is able to make herself available and accessible to countless others, both affectively and practically, inviting them to a community of spiritual friendship and support for which so many long in these chaotic times.

Many of you have no doubt had this same experience. When describing my commitment as a Sister For Christian Community to others, the question I am most often asked goes like this: "But if you say you don't have religious superiors and then say that you have a vow of obedience, I don't understand. Who do you obey?" To which I usually respond: "How about obeying God--the Holy Spirit?" All of which goes to show how distorted the concept of religious obedience has become, with the bureaucratic hierarchies and chains of command that have come to characterize both Church and state in our world today. Yet most often my answer seems to satisfy--indeed, to make a great deal of sense to--the questioner. What could make better sense than for the Christian to look for primary guidance from the Gospel, from the example of Jesus, and from the Holy Spirit who, as our essential tradition tells us, is God indwelling in each of us. Once again, the "radical impulse of biblical faith" becomes the litmus test of our obedience. As Sisters For Christian Community, this obedience is often discerned in the context of community, where we call upon the collective wisdom of our sisters, invoking together the movement of the Holy Spirit in the lives that we share.

Which brings me, beyond the vows, to other characteristics of SFCC which I believe are prophetic in our world today. In a contemporary culture which I describe as a paradigm of dominance, where the powerful command and the weak obey, a culture of "winners" and "losers", stands the SFCC commitment to collegiality. As our profile reads: "We are collegial in any decision that affects the community." When community decisions are made, they are decisions of the whole,

whether at the local, regional or international level. Our being counter-cultural in this regard is often one of the most challenging of the commitments we have made as Sisters For Christian Community, and one which we may be tempted to forgo in the interest of efficiency and "getting on with the job." I would urge us, however, to especially cherish this commitment and to handle it with reverence, both allowing and respecting the consensus decisions made at local and regional levels, consistent with the principle of subsidiarity promoted by Vatican II, and seeking that same consensus in our international gatherings. We will thereby be resisting the tendency of so many contemporary institutions to become increasingly more complex and legalistic, often to the detriment of their original vision, which is somehow lost in the bureaucratic shuffle. The very difficulty of consensus, I would suggest, has protected the simplicity and straightforwardness of the SFCC profile and its prophetic vision. Let us then continue to cherish and nurture our collegiality and subsidiarity, hallmarks of the prophetic vision of the Sisters For Christian Community.

### SOME FURTHER CHALLENGES

I have discussed, in an admittedly cursory fashion, the Profile of the community as a document and a vision which is, at one and the same time, traditional, contemporary and prophetic. Finally now, I would like to suggest two challenges which I see still facing us today, challenges which have no easy answers.--I certainly have none--but which I would invite us to reflect upon together. The first of these has to do with the way we capitalize the "F" in our title, "Sisters For Christian Community." It is my understanding that this was done to emphasize the principle charism of our community (though we do not use the word, "charism," in our Profile) of being builders of community wherever we may be, of facilitating community among the people of God and inviting others into community with us. While I do not suggest that this has not been done, and we have certainly always welcomed non-community members into our gatherings, I wonder if it is not time for us to devise, more intentionally, a way of inviting other Christians to be a real and acknowledged part of SFCC, including those who do not feel themselves called to consecrated celibacy. The individualism so prevalent in our world today finds so many of our sisters and brothers living lives of alienation and loneliness, often lacking, as well, the spiritual nurture that the parish might--but often does not--provide. I think that SFCC needs to ask how we can be for these sisters and brothers in a way which will enable them to share more fully in our community gatherings, our spirit, and our spirituality. Many canonical communities have already instituted associate memberships for women and men, married or single, gay or straight, widowed or divorced, who, without committing themselves to celibacy, are formally incorporated as "associates" of these communities. From my own experience of working with several of these communities, the response to their invitation to associate membership has been significant. Might not SFCC also explore the possibility of welcoming such candidates as, perhaps, "Companions For Christian Community" or "Partners For Christian Community"? The interest is evident. The model, while in no way negating the celibate commitment we make as Sisters For Christian Community, would honor, as well, the various lifestyles of our sisters and brothers and welcome them fully as our sisters and brothers.

My second challenge has to do with our ability--or lack thereof--to speak as a community to the larger society, a society which John Paul II has aptly described, I think, as a "culture of death."

While I do not discount in any way the actions taken and the voices raised by our sisters, individually, in challenging discrimination, oppression and violence in our world, we, as a community, are literally voiceless in condemning and resisting the evils of our day. On racism, sexism, war, capital punishment, poverty, exploitation of the poor and the weak, "born-again" nationalism, and a host of other horrors, the Sisters For Christian Community, as a community, are mute. And yet we know that evil thrives most easily when good people remain silent.

Here I would suggest that our SFCC commitment to collegiality, to decision making by consensus, which is so vital for us to honor in "any decision that affects the community," should not be allowed to muzzle us in decisions which address the culture of death which characterizes so much of the world around us. As women of faith, we are our brother's and sister's keepers. Our collective silence gives collective assent to the evils which surround us. Prayer, alone, even our individual efforts, will not assuage the cries of the poor. The task is too great. We should and must be able to respond as a community.

I have proposed two challenges that I see facing us as we mark this 25th anniversary of the founding of the Sisters For Christian Community: Taking seriously the for in "Sisters For Christian Community" by extending membership to those in lifestyles other than our own, and finding a collective, public voice with which to speak our faith to the "culture of death." By these challenges, I have not intended, dear sisters, to do an "end run" with assembly proposals. These are not---at present--proposals. But I am urging that we begin, at this assembly and in our local and regional meetings in the months ahead, to reflect on these challenges, to pray over them, and--guided by the radical impulse of biblical faith and our own SFCC vision--to consider how we might respond.

Our bonsai pots have long been shattered. Twenty-five years later, our roots are strong, our branches sturdy, our fruits abundant. It is time for us to grow eighty feet tall!